

TRUSTING MORE, WORRYING LESS

by Max Lucado



Introduction

It's a never-ending ride on a runaway rollercoaster—you're a permanent passenger... tied down, buckled up, chained to your seat.

The menacing vehicle snaps you at abrupt corners. It jerks you up impossible summits. It propels you, crashing down incredible valleys.

It's . . . anxiety. You're trapped. The more you worry, the more helpless you feel.

God knew that anxiety could do this to you. That's why he said don't worry. . . come to me and rest. . . in other words, trust me.

It's the only way to hit the brakes and bring anxiety to a halt.

OUR WEAKNESS, GOD'S POWER

THE KINGDOM of heaven. Its citizens are drunk on wonder. Consider the case of Sarai.¹ She is in her golden years, but God promises her a son. She gets excited. She visits the maternity shop and buys a few dresses. She plans her shower and remodels her tent. . . but no son. She eats a few birthday cakes and blows out a lot of candles. . . still no son. She goes through a decade of wall calendars . . . still no son.

So Sarai decides to take matters into her own hands. ("Maybe God needs me to take care of this one.")

She convinces Abram that time is running out. ("Face it, Abe, you ain't getting any younger, either.") She commands her maid, Hagar, to go into Abram's tent and see if he needs anything. ("And I mean 'anything'!") Hagar goes in a maid. She comes out a mom. And the problems begin.

Hagar is haughty. Sarai is jealous. Abram is dizzy from the dilemma. And God calls the baby boy a "wild donkey"—an appropriate name for one born out of stubbornness and destined to kick his way into history.

It isn't the cozy family Sarai expected. And it isn't a topic Abram and Sarai bring up very often at dinner.

Finally, fourteen years later, when Abram is pushing a century of years and Sarai ninety... when Abram has stopped listening to Sarai's advice, and Sarai has stopped giving it...when the wallpaper in the nursery is faded and the baby furniture is several seasons out of date...when the topic of the promised child brings sighs and tears and long looks into a silent sky...God pays them a visit and tells them they had better select a name for their new son.

Abram and Sarai have the same response: laughter. They laugh partly because it is too good to happen and partly because it might. They laugh because they have given up hope, and hope born anew is always funny before it is real.

They laugh at the lunacy of it all.

Abram looks over at Sarai—toothless and snoring in her rocker, head back and mouth wide open, as fruitful as a pitted prune and just as wrinkled. And he cracks up. He tries to contain it, but he can't. He has always been a sucker for a good joke.

Sarai is just as amused. When she hears the news, a cackle escapes before she can contain it. She mumbles something about her husband's needing a lot more than what he's got and then laughs again.

They laugh because that is what you do when someone says he can do the impossible.

¹ Genesis 16-18, 21.

They laugh a little at God, and a lot with God— for God is laughing, too. Then, with the smile still on his face, he gets busy doing what he does best—the unbelievable.

He changes a few things—beginning with their names. Abram, the father of one, will now be Abraham, the father of a multitude. Sarai, the barren one, will now be Sarah, the mother.

But their names aren't the only things God changes. He changes their minds. He changes their faith. He changes the number of their tax deductions. He changes the way they define the word impossible.

But most of all, he changes Sarah's attitude about trusting God. Were she to hear Jesus' statement about being poor in spirit, she could give a testimony: "He's right. I do things my way, I get a headache. I let God take over, I get a son. You try to figure that out. All I know is I am the first lady in town to pay her pediatrician with a Social Security check."

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Two thousand years later, here's another testimony²:

"The last thing I wanted to do was fish. But that was exactly what Jesus wanted to do. I had fished all night. My arms ached. My eyes burned. My neck was sore. All I wanted was to go home and let my wife rub the knots out of my back.

"It had been a long night. I don't know how many times we had thrown that net into the blackness and heard it slap against the sea. I don't know how many times we had held the twine rope as the net sank into the water. All night we had waited for that bump, that tug, that jerk that would clue us to haul in the catch ... but it had never come. At daybreak, I was ready to go home.

"Just as I was about to leave the beach, I noticed a crowd coming toward me. They were following a lanky fellow who walked with a broad swing and wide gait. He saw me and called my name. 'Morning, Jesus!' I called back. Though he was a hundred yards away, I could see his white smile. 'Quite a crowd, eh?' he yelled, motioning at the mass behind him. I nodded and sat down to watch.

"He stopped near the edge of the water and began to speak. Though I couldn't hear much, I could see a lot. I could see more and more people coming. With all the pressing and shoving, it's a wonder Jesus didn't get pushed down into the water. He was already knee-deep when he looked at me.

"I didn't have to think twice. He climbed into my boat, and John and I followed. We pushed out a bit. I leaned back against the bow, and Jesus began to teach.

"It seemed that half of Israel was on the beach. Men had left their work, women their household chores. I even recognized some priests. How they all listened! They scarcely moved, yet their eyes danced as if they were in some way seeing what they could be.

"When Jesus finished, he turned to me. I stood and had begun to pull anchor when he said, 'Push out into the deep, Peter. Let's fish.'

² Luke 5

"I groaned. I looked at John. We were thinking the same thing. As long as he wanted to use the boat for a platform, that was fine. But to use it for a fishing boat—that was our territory. I started to tell this carpenter-teacher, 'You stick to preaching, and I'll stick to fishing.' But I was more polite: 'We worked all night. We didn't catch a thing.'

"He just looked at me. I looked at John. John was waiting for my cue...

"I wish I could say I did it because of love. I wish I could say I did it out of devotion. But I can't. All I can say is there is a time to question and a time to listen. So, as much with a grunt as with a prayer, we pushed out.

"With every stroke of the oar, I muttered. With every pull of the paddle, I grumbled. 'No way. No way. Impossible. I may not know much, but I know fishing. And all we're going to come back with are some wet nets.'

"The noise on the beach grew distant, and soon the only sound was the smack of the waves against the hull. Finally we cast anchor. I picked up the heavy netting, held it waist-high, and started to throw it. That's when I caught a glimpse of Jesus out of the corner of my eye. His expression stopped me in midmotion.

"He was leaning out over the edge of the boat, looking out into the water where I was about to throw the net. And, get this, he was smiling. A boyish grin pushed his cheeks high and turned his round eyes into half-moons—the kind of smile you see when a child gives a gift to a friend and watches as it is unwrapped.

"He noticed me looking at him, and he tried to hide the smile, but it persisted. It pushed at the corners of his mouth until a flash of teeth appeared. He had given me a gift and could scarcely contain himself as I opened it.

"'Boy, is he in for a disappointment,' I thought as I threw the net. It flew high, spreading itself against the blue sky and floating down until it flopped against the surface, then sank. I wrapped the rope once around my hand and sat back for the long wait.

"But there was no wait. The slack rope yanked taut and tried to pull me overboard. I set my feet against the side of the boat and yelled for help. John and Jesus sprang to my side.

"We got the net in just before it began to tear. I'd never seen such a catch. It was like plopping down a sack of rocks in the boat. We began to take in water. John screamed for the other boat to help us.

"It was quite a scene: four fishermen in two boats, knee-deep in fish, and one carpenter seated on our bow, relishing the pandemonium.

"That's when I realized who he was. And that's when I realized who I was: I was the one who told God what he couldn't do!

"'Go away from me, Lord; I'm a sinful man.' There wasn't anything else I could say.

"I don't know what he saw in me, but he didn't leave. Maybe he thought if I would let him tell me how to fish, I would let him tell me how to live.

"It was a scene I would see many times over the next couple of years—in cemeteries with the dead, on hillsides with the hungry, in storms with the frightened, on roadsides with the sick. The characters would change, but the theme wouldn't. When we would say, 'No way,' he would say, 'My way.' Then the ones who doubted would scramble to salvage the blessing. And the One who gave it would savor the surprise."

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"My power shows up best in weak people."³

God said those words. Paul wrote them down. God said he was looking for empty vessels more than strong muscles. Paul proved it.

Before he encountered Christ, Paul had been somewhat of a hero among the Pharisees. You might say he was their Wyatt Earp. He kept the law and order—or, better said, revered the Law and gave the orders. Good Jewish moms held him up as an example of a good Jewish boy. He was given the seat of honor at the Jerusalem Lions' Club Wednesday luncheon. He had a "Who's Who in Judaism" paperweight on his desk and was selected "Most Likely to Succeed" by his graduating class. He was quickly establishing himself as the heir apparent to his teacher, Gamaliel.

If there is such a thing as a religious fortune, Paul had it. He was a spiritual billionaire, born with one foot in heaven, and he knew it:

If anyone ever had reason to hope that he could save himself, it would be I. If others could be saved by what they are, certainly I could! For I went through the Jewish initiation ceremony when I was eight days old, having been born into a pure-blooded Jewish home that was a branch of the old original Benjamin family. So I was a real Jew if there ever was one! What's more, I was a member of the Pharisees who demand the strictest obedience to every Jewish law and custom. And sincere? Yes, so much so that I greatly persecuted the Church; and I tried to obey every Jewish rule and regulation down to the very last point.⁴

Blue-blooded and wild-eyed, this young zealot was hell-bent on keeping the kingdom pure—and that meant keeping the Christians out. He marched through the countryside like a general demanding that backslidden Jews salute the flag of the motherland or kiss their family and hopes good-bye.

All this came to a halt, however, on the shoulder of a highway. Equipped with subpoenas, handcuffs, and a posse, Paul was on his way to do a little personal evangelism in Damascus. That's when someone slammed on the stadium lights, and he heard the voice.

When he found out whose voice it was, his jaw hit the ground, and his body followed. He braced himself for the worst. He knew it was all over. He felt the noose around his neck. He smelled the flowers in the hearse. He prayed that death would be quick and painless.

But all he got was silence and the first of a lifetime of surprises.

³ 2 Corinthians 12:9, LB.

⁴ Philippians 3:4-6, LB

He ended up bewildered and befuddled in a borrowed bedroom. God left him there a few days with scales on his eyes so thick that the only direction he could look was inside himself And he didn't like what he saw.

He saw himself for what he really was—to use his own words, the worst of sinners.⁵ A legalist. A killjoy. A bumptious braggart who claimed to have mastered God's code. A dispenser of justice who weighed salvation on a panscale.

That's when Ananias found him. He wasn't much to look at—haggard and groggy after three days of turmoil. Sarai wasn't much to look at either, nor was Peter. But what the three have in common says more than a volume of systematic theology. For when they gave up, God stepped in, and the result was a rollercoaster ride straight into the kingdom.

Paul was a step ahead of the rich young ruler. He knew better than to strike a deal with God. He didn't make any excuses; he just pleaded for mercy. Alone in the room with his sins on his conscience and blood on his hands, he asked to be cleansed.

Ananias' instructions to Paul are worth reading: "What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name."⁶

He didn't have to be told twice. The legalist Saul was buried, and the liberator Paul was born. He was never the same afterwards. And neither was the world.

Stirring sermons, dedicated disciples, and six thousand miles of trails. If his sandals weren't slapping, his pen was writing. If he wasn't explaining the mystery of grace, he was articulating the theology that would determine the course of Western civilization.

All of his words could be reduced to one sentence. "We preach Christ crucified."⁷ It wasn't that he lacked other sermon outlines; it was just that he couldn't exhaust the first one.

The absurdity of the whole thing kept him going. Jesus should have finished him on the road. He should have left him for the buzzards. He should have sent him to hell. But he didn't. He sent him to the lost.

Paul himself called it crazy. He described it with phrases like "stumbling block" and "foolishness," but chose in the end to call it "grace."⁸

And he defended his unquenchable loyalty by saying, "The love of Christ leaves [me] no choice."⁹

Paul never took a course in missions. He never sat in on a committee meeting. He never read a book on church growth. He was just inspired by the Holy Spirit and punch-drunk on the love that makes the impossible possible: salvation.

⁵ 1 Timothy 1:15.

⁶ Acts 22:16.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:23.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:23; Ephesians 2:8.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 5:14 NEB.

The message is gripping: Show a man his failures without Jesus, and the result will be found in the roadside gutter. Give a man religion without reminding him of his filth, and the result will be arrogance in a three-piece suit. But get the two in the same heart—get sin to meet Savior and Savior to meet sin—and the result just might be another Pharisee turned preacher who sets the world on fire.

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Four people: the rich young ruler, Sarah, Peter, Paul. A curious thread strings the four together—their names.

The final three had their names changed— Sarai to Sarah, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul. But the first one, the young yuppie, is never mentioned by name.

Perhaps that's the clearest explanation of the first beatitude. The one who made a name for himself is nameless. But the ones who called on Jesus' name—and his name only—got new names and, even more, new life.

Chapter Two

GOD'S SILENCE, OUR QUESTIONS

HE WAS a child of the desert. Leathery face. Tanned skin. Clothing of animal skins. What he owned fit in a pouch. His walls were the mountains and his ceiling the stars.

But not anymore. His frontier is walled out, his horizon hidden. The stars are memories. The fresh air is all but forgotten. And the stench of the dungeon relentlessly reminds the child of the desert that he is now a captive of the king.¹

In anyone's book, John the Baptist deserves better treatment than this. After all, isn't he the forerunner of the Christ? Isn't he a relative of the Messiah? At the very least, isn't his the courageous voice of repentance?

But most recently that voice, instead of opening the door of renewal, has opened the door to his own prison cell.

John's problems began when he called a king on the carpet.

On a trip to Rome, King Herod succumbed to the enticements of his brother's wife, Herodias. Deciding Herodias was better off married to him, Herod divorced his wife and brought his sister-in-law home.

The gossip columnists were fascinated, but John the Baptist was infuriated. He pounced on Herod like a desert scorpion, denouncing the marriage for what it was—adultery.

Herod might have let him get away with it. But not Herodias. This steamy seductress wasn't about to have her social climbing exposed. She told Herod to have John pulled off the speaking circuit and thrown into the dungeon. Herod hemmed and hawed until she whispered and wooed. Then Herod gave in.

But that wasn't enough for this mistress. She had her daughter strut before the king and his generals at a stag party. Herod, who was as easily duped as he was aroused, promised to do anything for the pretty young thing in the G-string.

"Anything?"

"You name it," he drooled.

She conferred with her mother, who was waiting in the wings, then returned with her request.

"I want John the Baptist."

¹ Matthew 14:1-12.

"You want a date with the prophet?"

"I want his head," replied the dancer. And then, reassured by a nod from her mother, she added, "On a silver platter, if you don't mind."

Herod looked at the faces around him. He knew it wasn't fair, but he also knew everyone was looking at him. And he *had* promised "anything." Though he personally had nothing against the country preacher, he valued the opinion polls much more than he valued John's life. After all, what's more important—to save face or to save the neck of an eccentric prophet?

The story reeks with inequity.

John dies because Herod lusts.

The good is murdered while the bad smirk.

A man of God is killed while a man of passion is winking at his niece.

Is this how God rewards his anointed? Is this how he honors his faithful? Is this how God crowns his chosen? With a dark dungeon and a shiny blade?

The inconsistency was more than John could take. Even before Herod reached his verdict, John was asking his questions. His concerns were outnumbered only by the number of times he paced his cell asking them. When he had a chance to get a message to Jesus, his inquiry was one of despair:

"When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'"²

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Note what motivated John's question. It was not just the dungeon or even death. It was the problem of unmet expectations—the fact that John was in deep trouble and Jesus was conducting business as usual.

Is this what messiahs do when trouble comes? Is this what God does when his followers are in a bind?

Jesus' silence was enough to chisel a leak into the dam of John's belief. "Are you the one? Or have I been following the wrong Lord?"

Had the Bible been written by a public relations agency, they would have eliminated that verse. It's not good PR strategy to admit that one of the cabinet members has doubts about the president. You don't let stories like that get out if you are trying to present a unified front. But the Scriptures weren't written by personality agents; they were inspired by an eternal God who knew that every disciple from then on would spend time in the dungeon of doubt. Though the circumstances have changed, the questions haven't.

² Matthew 11:3-4.

They are asked anytime the faithful suffer the consequences of the faithless. Anytime a person takes a step in the right direction, only to have her feet knocked out from under her, anytime a person does a good deed but suffers evil results, anytime a person takes a stand, only to end up flat on his face. . . the questions fall like rain:

"If God is so good, why do I hurt so bad?"

"If God is really there, why am I here?"

"What did I do to deserve this?"

"Did God slip up this time?"

"Why are the righteous persecuted?"

In his book *Disappointment with God*, Philip Yancey quotes a letter that articulates the problem of unmet expectations in all its excruciating reality. Meg Woodson lost two children to cystic fibrosis, and her daughter's death at age twenty-three was particularly traumatic. The following words speak of her pain and doubt as she struggled to cope with what happened:

I was sitting beside her bed a few days before her death when suddenly she began screaming. I will never forget those shrill, piercing, primal screams. . . It's against this background of human beings falling apart. . . that God, who could have helped, looked down on a young woman devoted to Him, quite willing to die for Him to give Him glory, and decided to sit on His hands and let her death top the horror charts for cystic fibrosis deaths.³

Does God sometimes sit on his hands? Does God sometimes choose to do nothing? Does God sometimes opt for silence even when I'm screaming my loudest?

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Some time ago, I took my family to the bicycle store to purchase a bike for five-year-old Jenna. She picked out a shiny "Starlett" with a banana seat and training wheels. And Andrea, age three, decided she wanted one as well.

I explained to Andrea that she was too young. I told her she was still having trouble with a tricycle and was too small for a two-wheeler. No luck; she still wanted a bike. I explained to her that when she was a bit older, she would get a bike, too. She just stared at me. I tried to tell her that a big bike would bring her more pain than pleasure, more scrapes than thrills. She turned her head and said nothing.

Finally I sighed and said this time her daddy knew best. Her response? She screamed it loud enough for everyone in the store to hear:

"Then I want a *new* daddy!"

Though the words were from a child's mouth, they carried an adult's sentiments.

Disappointment demands a change in command. When we don't agree with the One who calls the shots, our reaction is often the same as Andrea's—the same as John's. "Is he the right one for this job?" Or, as John put it, "Are you the one? Should we look for another?"

³ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment With God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), p. 158.

Andrea, with her three-year-old reasoning powers, couldn't believe that a new bike would be anything less than ideal for her. From her vantage point, it would be the source of eternal bliss. And from her vantage point, the one who could grant that bliss was "sitting on his hands."

John couldn't believe that anything less than his release would be for the best interest of all involved. In his opinion, it was time to exercise some justice and get some action. But the One who had the power was "sitting on his hands."

I can't believe that God would sit in silence while a missionary is kicked out of a foreign country or a Christian loses a promotion because of his beliefs or a faithful wife is abused by an unbelieving husband. These are just three of many items that have made their way onto my prayer list—all prayers that seem to have gone unanswered.

Rule of thumb: Clouds of doubt are created when the warm, moist air of our expectations meets the cold air of God's silence.

If you've heard the silence of God, if you've been left standing in the dungeon of doubt, then understand this: Perhaps it isn't that God is silent. Perhaps, like John, you've been listening for the wrong answer. John had been listening for an answer to his earthly problems, while Jesus was busy resolving his heavenly ones.

That's worth remembering the next time you hear the silence of God.

If you've asked for a mate, but are still sleeping alone. . . if you've asked for a child, but your womb stays barren. . . if you've asked for healing, but are still hurting. . . don't think God isn't listening. He is. And he is answering requests you are not even making.

Saint Teresa of Avila was insightful enough to pray, "Do not punish me by granting that which I wish or ask."⁴

The apostle Paul was honest enough to write, "We do not know what we ought to pray for."⁵

The fact is, John wasn't asking too much; he was asking too little. He was asking the Father to resolve the temporary, while Jesus was busy resolving the eternal. John was asking for immediate favor, while Jesus was orchestrating the eternal solution.

Does that mean that Jesus has no regard for injustice? No. He cares about persecutions. He cares about inequities and hunger and prejudice. And he knows what it is like to be punished for something he didn't do. He knows the meaning of the phrase, "It's just not right."

For it wasn't right that people spit into the eyes that had wept for them. It wasn't right that soldiers ripped chunks of flesh out of the back of their God. It wasn't right that spikes pierced the hands that formed the earth. And it wasn't right that the Son of God was forced to hear the silence of God.

It wasn't right, but it happened.

⁴ Quoted in *A guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, p.345.

⁵ Romans 8:26.

For while Jesus was on the cross, God did sit on his hands. He did turn his back. He did ignore the screams of the innocent.

He sat in silence while the sins of the world were placed upon his Son. And he did nothing while a cry a million times bloodier than John's echoed in the black sky: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁶

Was it right? No.
Was it fair? No.
Was it love? Yes.

In a world of injustice, God once and for all tipped the scales in the favor of hope. And he did it by sitting on his hands so that we could know the kingdom of God.

⁶ Mathew 27:46.

Chapter Three

OUR FEARS, GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

"They saw Jesus . . . walking on the water; and they were terrified."¹

FAITH IS OFTEN the child of fear. Fear propelled Peter out of the boat. He'd ridden these waves before. He knew what these storms could do. He'd heard the stories. He'd seen the wreckage. He knew the widows. He knew the storm could kill. And he wanted out.

All night he wanted out. For nine hours he'd tugged on sails, wrestled with oars, and searched every shadow on the horizon for hope. He was soaked to the soul and bone weary of the wind's banshee wail.

Look into Peter's eyes and you won't see a man of conviction. Search his face and you won't find a gutsy grimace. Later on, you will. You'll see his courage in the garden. You'll witness his devotion at Pentecost. You'll behold his faith in his epistles.

But not tonight. Look into his eyes tonight and see fear—a suffocating, heart-racing fear of a man who has no way out.

But out of this fear would be born an act of faith, for faith is often the child of fear.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,"² wrote the wise man.

Peter could have been his sermon illustration.

If Peter had seen Jesus walking on the water during a calm, peaceful day, do you think that he would have walked out to him?

Nor do I.

Had the lake been carpet smooth and the journey pleasant do you think that Peter would have begged Jesus to take him on a stroll across the top of the water? Doubtful.

But give a man a choice between sure death and a crazy chance, and he'll take the chance . . . every time.

Great acts of faith are seldom born out of calm calculation.

It wasn't logic that caused Moses to raise his staff on the bank of the Red Sea.³

It wasn't medical research that convinced Naaman to dip seven times in the river.⁴

¹I John 6:19.

²Proverbs 9:10.

³Exodus 14:15, 16.

It wasn't common sense that caused Paul to abandon the Law and embrace grace.⁵

And it wasn't a confident committee that prayed in a small room in Jerusalem for Peter's release from prison.⁶ It was a fearful, desperate, band of backed-into-a-corner believers. It was a church with no options. A congregation of havenots pleading for help.

And never were they stronger.

At the beginning of every act of faith, there is often a seed of fear.

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Biographies of bold disciples begin with chapters of honest terror. Fear of death. Fear of failure. Fear of loneliness. Fear of a wasted life. Fear of failing to know God.

Faith begins when you see God on the mountain and you are in the valley and you know that you're too weak to make the climb. You see what you need. . . you see what you have . . . and what you have isn't enough to accomplish anything.

Peter had given it his best. But his best wasn't enough.

Moses had a sea in front and an enemy behind. The Israelites could swim or they could fight. But neither option was enough.

Naaman had tried the cures and consulted the soothsayers. Traveling a long distance to plunge into a muddy river made little sense when there were clean ones in his backyard. But what option did he have?

Paul had mastered the Law. He had mastered the system. But one glimpse of God convinced him that sacrifices and symbols were not enough.

The Jerusalem church knew that they had no hope of getting Peter out of prison. They had Christians who would fight, but too few. They had clout, but too little. They didn't need muscle. They needed a miracle.

So does Peter. He is aware of two facts: He is going down, and Jesus is staying up. He knows where he would rather be.

There's nothing wrong with this response. Faith that begins with fear will end up nearer the Father.

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I went to West Texas some time back to speak at the funeral of a godly, family friend. He had raised five children. One son, Paul, told a story about his earliest memory of his father.

⁴ 2 Kings 5:13, 14

⁵ Romans 3.

⁶ Acts 12:6-17.

It was spring in West Texas—tornado season. Paul was only three or four years old at the time, but he remembers vividly the day that a tornado hit their small town.

His father hustled the kids indoors and had them lie on the floor while he laid a mattress over them. But his father didn't climb under the protection. Paul remembers peeking out from under the mattress and seeing him standing by an open window, watching the funnel cloud twist and churn across the prairie.

When Paul saw his father, he knew where he wanted to be. He struggled out of his mother's arms, crawled out from under the mattress, and ran to wrap his arms around his dad's leg.

"Something told me," Paul said, "that the safest place to stand in a storm was next to my father."

Something told Peter the same thing.

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"Lord, if it's you," Peter says, "tell me to come to you on the water."⁷

Peter is not testing Jesus; he is pleading with Jesus. Stepping onto a stormy sea is not a move of logic; it is a move of desperation.

Peter grabs the edge of the boat. Throws out a leg . . . follows with the other. Several steps are taken. It's as if an invisible ridge of rocks runs beneath his feet. At the end of the ridge is the glowing face of a never-say-die friend.

We do the same, don't we? We come to Christ in an hour of deep need. We abandon the boat of good works. We realize, like Moses, that human strength won't save us. So we look to God in desperation. We realize, like Paul, that all the good works in the world are puny when laid before the Perfect One. We realize, like Peter, that spanning the gap between us and Jesus is a feat too great for our feet. So we beg for help. Hear his voice. And step out in fear, hoping that our little faith will be enough.

Faith is not born at the negotiating table where we barter our gifts in exchange for God's goodness. Faith is not an award given to the most learned. It's not a prize given to the most disciplined. It's not a title bequeathed to the most religious.

Faith is a desperate dive out of the sinking boat of human effort and a prayer that God will be there to pull us out of the water. Paul wrote about this kind of faith in the letter to the Ephesians:

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."⁸

Paul is clear. The supreme force in salvation is God's grace. Not our works. Not our talents. Not our feelings. Not our strength.

Salvation is God's sudden, calming presence during the stormy seas of our lives. We hear his voice; we take the step.

⁷ Matthew 14:28.

⁸ Ephesians 2:8, 9.

We, like Paul, are aware of two things: We are great sinners and we need a great Savior.

We, like Peter, are aware of two facts: We are going down and God is standing up. So we scramble out. We leave behind the *Titanic* of self-righteousness and stand on the solid path of God's grace.

And, surprisingly, we are able to walk on water. Death is disarmed. Failures are forgivable. Life has real purpose. And God is not only within sight, he is within reach.

With precious, wobbly steps, we draw closer to him. For a season of surprising strength, we stand upon his promises. It doesn't make sense that we are able to do this. We don't claim to be worthy of such an incredible gift. When people ask how in the world we can keep our balance during such stormy times, we don't boast. We don't brag. We point unabashedly to the One who makes it possible. Our eyes are on him.

"Nothing in my hand I bring; Simply to Thy cross I cling,"⁹ we sing.

"Dressed in His righteousness alone, Faultless to stand before the throne,"¹⁰ we declare.

"'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved,"¹¹ we explain.

Some of us, unlike Peter, never look back.

Others of us, like Peter, feel the wind and are afraid.¹²

Maybe we face the wind of pride: "I'm not such a bad sinner after all. Look at what I can do."

Perhaps we face the wind of legalism: "I know that Jesus is doing part of this, but I have to do the rest."

Most of us, though, face the wind of doubt: "I'm too bad for God to treat me this well. I don't deserve such a rescue."

And downward we plunge. Heavied by mortality's mortar, we sink. Gulping and thrashing, we fall into a dark, wet world. We open our eyes and see only blackness. We try to breathe, and no air comes. We kick and fight our way back to the surface.

With our heads barely above the water, we have to make a decision.

The prideful ask: "Do we 'save face' and drown in pride? Or do we scream for help and take God's hand?"

The legalists ask: "Do we sink under the lead-heavy weight of the Law? Or do we abandon the codes and beg for grace?"

⁹ "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me," by Augustus M. Toplady.

¹⁰ "The Solid Rock," by Edward Mote.

¹¹ "Amazing Grace," by John Newton.

¹² Matthew 14:30.

The doubters ask: “Do we nurture doubt by mumbling, ‘I’ve really let him down this time?’ Or do we hope that the same Christ who called us out of the boat will call us out of the sea?”

We know Peter’s choice.

“[As he was] beginning to sink, [he] cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”¹³

“Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.”¹⁴

* * * * *

We also know the choice of another sailor in another storm.

Although separated by seventeen centuries, this sailor and Peter are drawn together by several striking similarities:

- Both made their living on the sea.
- Both met their Savior after a nine-hour battle in a storm.
- Both met the Father in fear and then followed him in faith.
- Both walked away from their boats and became preachers of the Truth.

You know the story of Peter, the first sailor. Let me tell you about the second, whose name was John.

He had served on the seas since he was eleven years old. His father, an English shipmaster in the Mediterranean, took him aboard and trained him well for a life in the Royal Navy.

Yet what John gained in experience, he lacked in discipline. He mocked authority. Ran with the wrong crowd. Indulged in the sinful ways of a sailor. Although his training would have qualified him to serve as an officer, his behavior caused him to be flogged and demoted.

In his early twenties, he made his way to Africa, where he became intrigued with the lucrative slave trade. At age twenty-one, he made his living on the *Greyhound*, a slave ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

John ridiculed the moral and poked fun at the religious. He even made jokes about a book that would eventually help reshape his life: *The Imitation of Christ*. In fact, he was degrading that book a few hours before his ship sailed into an angry storm.

That night the waves pummeled the *Greyhound*, spinning the ship one minute on the top of a wave. Plunging her the next into a watery valley.

John awakened to find his cabin filled with water. A side of the *Greyhound* had collapsed. Ordinarily such damage would have sent a ship to the bottom in a matter of minutes. The *Greyhound*, however, was carrying buoyant cargo and remained afloat.

John worked at the pumps all night. For nine hours, he and the other sailors struggled to keep the ship from sinking. But he knew that it was a losing cause. Finally, when his hopes were more battered

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Matthew 14:31.

than the vessel, he threw himself on the saltwater-soaked deck and pleaded, “If this will not do, then Lord have mercy on us all.”

John didn’t deserve mercy, but he received it. The *Greyhound* and her crew survived.

John never forgot God’s mercy shown on that tempestuous day in the roaring Atlantic. He returned to England where he became a prolific composer. You’ve sung his songs, like this one:

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.¹⁵*

This slave-trader-turned-songwriter was John Newton.

Along with his hymn writing, he also became a powerful pulpiteer. For nearly fifty years, he filled pulpits and churches with the story of the Savior who meets you and me in the storm.

A year or two before his death, people urged him to give up preaching because of his failing sight. "What!" he explained. "Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can yet speak?"

He wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t stop. What had begun as a prayer of fear resulted in a lifetime of faith. During his last years, someone asked him about his health. He confessed that his powers were failing. “My memory is almost gone,” he said, “but I remember two things: I am a great sinner, and Jesus is a great Savior.”

What more do you and I need to remember?

* * * * *

Two sailors and two seas. Two vessels in two storms. Two prayers of fear and two lives of faith. Uniting them is one Savior—one God who’ll walk through hell or high water to extend a helping hand to a child who cries for help.

¹⁵ “Amazing Grace,” by John Newton.

Chapter Four

OUR DOUBTS, GOD'S PROMISES

THERE ARE SNOWSTORMS. There are hail storms. There are rainstorms. And there are doubtstorms.

Every so often a doubtstorm rolls into my life, bringing with it a flurry of questions and gale-force winds of fear. And, soon after it comes, a light shines through it.

Sometimes the storm comes after the evening news. Some nights I wonder why I watch it. Some nights it's just too much. From the steps of the Supreme Court to the steppes of South Africa, the news is usually gloomy . . . thirty minutes of bite-sized tragedies. A handsome man in a nice suit with a warm voice gives bad news. They call him the anchorman. Good title. One needs an anchor in today's tempestuous waters.

Sometimes I wonder, *How can our world get so chaotic?*

Sometimes the storm comes when I'm at work. Story after story of homes that won't heal and hearts that won't melt. Always more hunger than food. More needs than money. More questions than answers. On Sundays I stand before a church with a three-point outline in my hand, thirty minutes on the clock, and a prayer on my lips. I do my best to say something that will convince a stranger that an unseen God still hears.

And I sometimes wonder why so many hearts have to hurt.

Do you ever get doubtstorms? Some of you don't, I know. I've talked to you. Some of you have a "Davidish" optimism that defies any Goliath. I used to think that you were naive at best and phony at worst.

I don't think that anymore.

I think you are gifted. You are gifted with faith. You can see the rainbow before the clouds part.

If you have this gift, then skip this chapter. I won't say anything you need to hear.

But others of you wonder . . .

You wonder what others know that you don't. You wonder if you are blind or if they are. You wonder why some proclaim "Eureka" before the gold is found. You wonder why some shout "Land ho" before the fog has cleared. You wonder how some people believe so confidently while you believe so reluctantly.

As a result, you are a bit uncomfortable on the padded pew of blind belief. Your Bible hero is Thomas. Your middle name is Caution. Your queries are the bane of every Sunday school teacher.

"If God is so good, why do I sometimes feel so bad?"

“If his message is so clear, why do I get so confused?”

“If the Father is in control, why do good people have gut-wrenching problems?”

You wonder if it is a blessing or a curse to have a mind that never rests. But you would rather be a cynic than a hypocrite, so you continue to pray with one eye open and wonder:

- about starving children
- about the power of prayer
- about the depths of grace
- about Christians in cancer wards
- about who you are to ask such questions anyway.

Tough questions. Throw-in-the-towel questions. Questions the disciples must have asked in the storm.

All they could see were black skies as they bounced in the battered boat. Swirling clouds. Wind-driven white caps. Pessimism that buried the coastline. Gloom that swamped the bow. What could have been a pleasant trip became a white-knuckled ride through a sea of fear.

Their question—What hope do we have of surviving a stormy night?

My question—Where is God when his world is stormy?

Doubtstorms: turbulent days when the enemy is too big, the task too great, the future too bleak, and the answers too few.

Every so often a storm will come, and I’ll look up into the blackening sky and say, “God, a little light, please?”

The light came for the disciples. A figure came to them walking on the water. It wasn’t what they expected. Perhaps they were looking for angels to descend or heaven to open. Maybe they were listening for a divine proclamation to still the storm. We don’t know what they were looking for. But one thing is for sure, they weren’t looking for Jesus to come walking on the water.

“‘It’s a ghost,’ they said and cried out in fear” (Mart. 14:26).

And since Jesus came in a way they didn’t expect, they almost missed seeing the answer to their prayers.

And unless we look and listen closely, we risk making the same mistake. God’s lights in our dark nights are as numerous as the stars, if only we’ll look for them.

Can I share a few lights with you that have illuminated my world recently?

* * * * *

A friend and I sat in front of my house in his car and talked about his dilemma. His chief client pulled out on him, leaving him big bills and few solutions. What the client did wasn’t right, but he did it anyway. The client’s company was big and my friend’s was small, and there wasn’t a lot he could do. My friend was left with a den of hungry lions wanting six figures’ worth of satisfaction.

“I called my uncle and told him what had happened. I told him I was thinking of filing for bankruptcy.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He didn’t say anything,” my friend responded. “After he was silent for a long time, I said it for him. ‘We don’t do it like that, do we?’”

“‘No, we don’t,’ he told me. So I’ll pay the bills. If I have to sell my house, I’ll pay my bills.”

I was encouraged. Somebody still believed that if he did what was right, God would do what was best. There was still some we-don’t-do-it-like-that faith in the world. The sky began to clear.

* * * * *

Light number two came from a cancer ward.

“We will celebrate forty-four years tomorrow,” Jack said, feeding his wife.

She was bald. Her eyes were sunken, and her speech was slurred. She looked straight ahead, only opening her mouth when he brought the fork near. He wiped her cheek. He wiped his brow.

“She has been sick for five years,” he told me. “She can’t walk. She can’t take care of herself. She can’t even feed herself, but I love her. And,” he spoke louder so she could hear, “we are going to beat this thing, aren’t we, Honey?”

He fed her a few bites and spoke again, “We don’t have insurance. When I could afford it, I thought I wouldn’t need it. Now I owe this hospital more than \$50,000.” He was quiet for a few moments as he gave her a drink. Then he continued. “But they don’t pester me. They know I can’t pay, but they admitted us with no questions asked. The doctors treat us like we are their best-paying patients. Who would’ve imagined such kindness?”

I had to agree with him. Who would’ve imagined such kindness? In a thorny world of high-tech, expensive, often criticized health care, it was reassuring to find professionals who would serve two who had nothing to give in return.

Jack thanked me for coming, and I thanked God that once again a sinew of light reminded me of the sun behind the clouds.

* * * * *

Then, a few days later, another light.

Larry Brown is the coach of the San Antonio Spurs, the local professional basketball team. I don’t know him personally (although rumor has it that he wants me to sign a multi-year contract and play point guard for the team . . . nice fantasy).

Coach Brown recently spent an afternoon at a local men’s store, signing autographs. He was scheduled to spend two hours, but ended up spending three. Pencil-and-pad-toting kids besieged the place, asking him questions and shaking his hand.

When he was finally able to slip out, he climbed into his car, only to notice a touching sight. A late-arriving youngster pedaled up, jumped off his bike, and ran to the window to see if the coach was still in the store. When he saw he wasn't, he turned slowly and sadly, walked over to his bike, and began to ride off.

Coach Brown turned off the ignition, climbed out of the car, and walked over to the boy. They chatted a few minutes, went next door to a drugstore, sat down at a table, and had a soft drink.

No reporters were near. No cameras were on. As far as these two knew, no one knew. I'm sure Larry Brown had other things to do that afternoon. No doubt he had other appointments to keep. But it's doubtful that anything he might have done that afternoon was more important than what he did.

In a world of big-bucked, high-glossed professional sports, it did me good to hear of one coach who is still a coach at heart. Hearing what he did was enough to blow away any lingering clouds of doubt and to leave me warmed by God's light . . . his gentle light.

* * * * *

Gentle lights. God's solutions for doubtstorms. Gold-flecked glows that amber hope into blackness. Not thunderbolts. Not explosions of light. Just gentle lights. A business-man choosing honesty. A hospital choosing compassion. A celebrity choosing kindness.

Visible evidence of the invisible hand.

Soft reminders that optimism is not just for fools.

Funny. None of the events were "religious." None of the encounters occurred in a ceremony or a church service. None will make the six o'clock news.

But such is the case with gentle lights.

When the disciples saw Jesus in the middle of their stormy night, they called him a ghost. A phantom. A hallucination. To them, the glow was anything but God.

When we see gentle lights on the horizon, we often have the same reaction. We dismiss occasional kindness as apparitions, accidents, or anomalies. Anything but God.

"When Jesus comes," the disciples in the boat may have thought, "he'll split the sky. The sea will be calm. The clouds will disperse."

"When God comes," we doubters think, "all pain will flee. Life will be tranquil. No questions will remain."

And because we look for the bonfire, we miss the candle. Because we listen for the shout, we miss the whisper.

But it is in burnished candles that God comes, and through whispered promises he speaks: "When you doubt, look around; I am closer than you think."

STUDY GUIDE

CHAPTER ONE OUR WEAKNESS, GOD'S POWER

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

1. How does this chapter interpret being "poor in spirit"? How does this compare with any previous ideas you had about what this beatitude means?
2. Luke's version of this beatitude (found in Luke 6:20, 24) omits the "in spirit" idea entirely; it simply states that "the rich" have their reward here and therefore cannot expect a reward in heaven. And Jesus tells the rich young ruler directly that "it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:23-24). Do you think the first beatitude applies especially to those who are poor in material possessions? If not, why does Matthew make these specific comments about material wealth? (You may find some ideas in the end notes for this chapter.)
3. List three reasons why being poor in spirit as described in this chapter is difficult for most of us. Why do we have such a hard time admitting our own inadequacy and failures even to God and ourselves?
4. List what you consider your five greatest strengths and your five greatest weaknesses. Then examine your list in light of chapter 1. Does being poor in spirit mean denying your strengths or not trying to improve your weaknesses? Does it mean being "down on yourself"? Why or why not?
5. Is it possible to be both arrogant and insecure at the same time? What do you think are the motives behind the rich young ruler's self-justification and over achievement?
6. What is the difference between trying to achieve salvation and trying to please God? Between being poor in spirit and being a poor steward of your God-given gifts?
7. Read the following parables describing the "kingdom of heaven": Matthew 13:24-33, 44-50. What additional insight do these parables give about the nature of the "kingdom" in which the poor in spirit will live?
8. Read Matthew 16:13-20, which tells the circumstances under which Peter's name was changed and he was given the "keys to the kingdom of heaven." What elements of this account point to Peter's being poor in spirit? What does this passage tell you about the nature of the kingdom?
9. What sort of positive change would you like in your life? According to this chapter, what would be your best strategy for such change?

CHAPTER TWO
GOD’S SILENCE, OUR QUESTIONS

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of God."*

1. According to this chapter, why did John send word to ask Jesus if he was really the Messiah?
2. Name a situation in which you have felt persecuted for doing what was right. What was the outcome of your experience?
3. What are some of the explanations you’ve heard for times when God seems silent? Which explanations seemed most satisfactory? Which didn’t satisfy you?
4. Do persecution and “God’s silence” always go hand in hand, or are they two separate things? Why do you think so?
5. What are some ways (subtle and overt) that Christians are persecuted “because of righteousness”?
6. Read Proverbs 21:2 and Jeremiah 17:9. What do these passages suggest about how we can interpret the bad things that happen to us? If we are in trouble, how can we be sure that our persecution is “because of righteousness”—that we are in trouble for the right reasons?
7. The Book of Job is another biblical account of a person who suffered from God’s seeming silence in the face of injustice. When struck with numerous, undeserved afflictions, he, too, questioned God. But Job’s questions were different, as were the answers he received and the outcome of the story.
 - Read Job 3:23, 7:20-21, 10:2-7, 13:20-24, 24:1-12.
What questions did Job ask God?
 - Read Job 38:1-21, 40:1-14, and 42:1-6.
What was God’s answer? How was it similar to Jesus’ answer to John?
How was it different?
8. Write down the three characteristics of Christ’s kingdom that are implied in Jesus’ answer to John. In what ways have you seen these characteristics continuing in your lifetime?

Chapter Three
OUR FEARS, GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

1. How do you respond when you are backed into a corner. Does your faith flourish or flicker? Do you cling to God or your own self-sufficiency?
2. Would you agree that "faith is often the child of fear"? Why or why not?
3. How would you define faith as it is portrayed in this chapter? Compare your answer to the description of faith in Hebrews 11:1,6.
4. Matthew 14:28-31 tells about Peter's adventure on the water. What parallels do you see between this passage and aspects of your life? Describe a time when you took a small step of faith and were surprised by the way God met your need.
5. Read Matthew 21:21-22; Romans 1:17; 5:1,2; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8. When we step out in faith, how does Jesus respond?

CHAPTER FOUR

OUR DOUBTS, GOD'S PROMISES

1. Jesus' disciples weren't the only ones in the Bible to have doubtstorms. Moses seems to be plagued with them (see Exodus 3:7-4:17; 5:20-6:12; 6:28-7:6; 17:1-7—just to name a few). The entire book of Job is a doubtstorm. Some of Jesus' disciples faced doubtstorms after he died (Luke 24:13-32).

Can you envision the intensity of these doubtstorms? In what ways did God show his light? Do you think those glimmers of light were expected? Why or why not?

2. Describe your blackest doubtstorms. In what unexpected ways has God shown his light to you in the midst of those storms?
3. What gentle light from God have you seen recently. Did it appear in a way you expected?
4. Have you ever missed—or almost missed—seeing God's gentle light in the midst of your doubtstorms? How can you train your heart to see his gentle light more clearly? Write down three specific ways in which you will practice faith this week—at home, at work, with friends. Share your "faith steps" with a friend or family member.

Notes

Chapter 1—Our Weakness, God's Power

1. See Genesis 16-18, 21.
2. See Luke 5.
3. 2 Corinthians 12:9, LB.
4. Philippians 3:4—6, LB.
5. 1 Timothy 1:15.
6. Acts 22:16.
7. 1 Corinthians 1:23.
8. 1 Corinthians 1:23; Ephesians 2:8.
9. 1 Corinthians 5:14, NEB.

Chapter 2—God's Silence, Our Questions

1. Matthew 14:1-12.
2. Matthew 11:3-4.
3. Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 158.
4. Quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, 345.
5. Romans 8:26.
6. Matthew 27:46.

Chapter 3—Our Fears, God's Faithfulness

1. 1. John 6:19.
2. Proverbs 9:10.
3. Exodus 14:15, 16.
4. 2Kings5:13,14.
5. Romans3.
6. Acts 12:6—17.
7. Matthew 14:28.
8. Ephesians 2:8, 9.
9. "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me," by Augustus M. Toplady.
10. "The Solid Rock," by Edward Mote.
11. "Amazing Grace," by John Newton.
12. Matthew 14:30.
13. Ibid.
14. Matthew 14:31.
15. "Amazing Grace," by John Newton.

May this pure and simple message of hope lift you up today

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